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ABSTRACT

Arising out of an informal survey of approximately 50 books for children with a listening theme, this paper explores how picture books with listening themes can be used to improve children's listening ability, provide enjoyment, and expose them to story structure, thus leading to an awareness of how tales are spun and an ability to predict what is going to happen. The paper discusses picture books grouped according to three categories: awareness of sounds, valuing of quiet and poetic sounds, and listening to others. The first category contains books that encourage children to listen and participate through either guessing the sounds or providing the sounds themselves. The second category includes books that encourage an appreciation for softer, quieter sounds and includes poetry. The third category stresses the need of human beings to be listened to and helps provide children with a greater understanding of human relationships. An annotated bibliography of the 50 books, divided according to the same categories, is included. (EL)

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LISTENING AND STORY STRUCTURE IN BOOKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

by

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Listening Association, March, 1985, Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

Paper for session ILA, Orlando, March, 1985, "Listening and Reading: the Dynamic Duo" ("Listening and Story Structure in Books for Young Children")

This talk, illustrated with slides, grows out of an informal survey of approximately fifty books for children (infant through middle school) that have some kind of "listening" theme. Many are quality children's literature with fine art work and design. Three large categories of books appeared to emerge: (1) awareness raising about listening; (2) valuing of quiet sounds; and (3) listening to others. In the first category, "Awareness," subcategories exist, dealing mainly with: identifying sounds; guessing and more pedagogical treatment of sound (ostensibly to develop comprehension skills); scary sounds that might frighten young children (a desensitizing intent, perhaps); and finally those sounds that are both loud and enjoyable.

The second category, "Valuing of Quiet Sounds," is subdivided into books whose intent is not only to applaud quiet sounds (useful in some classrooms), but to be highly poetic about listening experiences, and finally to engage in sensitive self-listening.. The third and last category that emerged, listening to others, includes subcategories on the need to be listened to, consideration of others during listening experiences, and the handicapped. Both of these aspects are treated: persons highly sensitive with listening when sight is denied, and the impact of deafness on self and others. A final subcategory under listening to others is what the French have termed "mal entendu" or humorous miscomprehension of words, often leading to intricate plot developments.

Speaking of plot--as the listening themes are examined in the books, some indication of story structures are also indicated. Structues range from very little if any in the books for the youngest to highly crafted ones. For the youngest the structures appear to often take the form of guessing the sound, with text questions, (and opportunity to teach). Many stories progress in the following ways: scenic units of interlocking conflicts; different perceptions and points of view from characters; the traditional series of 3's in one book; use of irony in the endings; and of course the usual beginning, middle, and end structures. Sometimes the listener/reader finds a character revelation structure with little or no plot. Then there are archetype plots: e. g., the quest, the journey, confrontation with "monster." Many of the books have a theme, e.g., "When it comes to reaching listeners, even the smallest can make a contribution." In the slide presentation these ideas are illustrated by 16 books for children. These and more books in each category are provided in a 43-item, annotated bibliography.

In sum, it makes sense that if a child can not abstract and use story structures while listening, there is little likelihood of use while reading. If use of story grammar is a useful tool while reading, then teachers of young and old, but especially young children, may wish to consider meeting several goals at once. They are: using books with listening themes to raise awareness and sensitivity about listening, while developing tools that serve comprehension in both listening and reading--awareness of structures, also useful when a child wants to write. And at the same time teachers can provide for highly positive feeling tone about joyous, touching, and amusing uses of communication. Such use of quality books can motivate, develop, and enhance both listening & reading: the dynamic duo.

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LISTENING AND STORY STRUCTURE IN BOOKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Quality picture books, well-written prose or poetry presented along with esthetically pleasing illustrations, form ideal partnerships with aims seeking to promote listening. Such books with listening themes can serve dual purposes, providing great enjoyment while exposing children to the values of listening. For those books with a plot there is an inherent story structure. Exposure to story structure leads to children's awareness of how tales are spun and consequent ability to predict what is going to happen. The ability to arrange incoming information into some sort of structure is widely believed to be very helpful to young children as they learn to cope with listening to the longer passages that prose requires. Perception of structure helps children make sense of what they hear or read (listening/reading comprehension). Structure helps as they attempt to write and organize their ideas into a meaningful message. Thus theme and structure in children's books is harnessable to goals of listening instruction in the classroom.

One way of categorizing listening themes discernible in picture books is the following:

1. Awareness of sounds
2. Valuing of Quiet and Poetic Sounds
3. Listening to Others

The following sections treat each in turn.

Awareness of sounds.

There are many books for young children that represent sounds. Youngsters enjoy sounds--they are interested in the different sounds made by the many beings and things in their environment. They like to listen to them and imitate them. Children's imaginative play is riddled with the sounds of things that go, animals, and anything else that fits in with the pretense of the moment. Ann Rand's Listen! Listen! depicts various things making noises, while the text "writes" the sound and explains what makes the sound. "But the sound I like most is the crunch, crunch of buttered toast." In Margaret Wise Brown's classic Noisy Book, the little dog Muffin must wear a bandage over his eyes, and so is forced to pay particular attention to the sounds he hears. Both books have a sequence of guessing a sound, thus providing participation for the reader, as well as a surprise. ("Was it a _____? No. Was it a _____?" etc.)

Hardly anyone, young or old, has missed the experience of being in a quiet environment, such as at night, and hearing a scary sound. Children will quickly identify with the bear children in What Was That! by Geda Mathews. Even the small sounds of little bugs getting ready for bed can be scary if you are just a little bear all alone in your bed at

night. This story is humorously told, uses a pattern of 3's, and has an ironic, funny ending.

While some sounds may stimulate fears or provoke children to deal with their insecurities, many are perceived boisterously by children when they are feeling safe and powerful. "The louder the better" seems to be the motto much of the time, much to the dismay of many (more sedate) adults. Like a picture dictionary, Peter Spier's Crash! Bang! Boom! depicts objects with words written close by representing the sound they make. Young readers or listeners are encouraged to provide sounds to accompany the adventures of a dog with a series of noisy escapades in A Very Noisey Day by Rolf Myller.

Naturally, all books which attempt to make children more aware of listening to sounds can be used as pedagogical tools. Sounds are described and listened to through the vehicle of the passages in prose. Children's participation can be encouraged through their attempts to guess the sounds, or through invitations to provide the sounds themselves.

Valuing of Quiet and Poetic Sounds.

Appreciation for softer sounds seems to come later for some children, but hopefully there is room in all our lives for these quieter sounds. The young prince in Benjamin Elkind's book, The Loudest Noise in the World, discovers

this when he requests noisiness for his birthday. He is very surprised to get silence--and delighted, for he is able to hear, for the first time, the musical tones of a bird singing. Some teachers will appreciate this book as a means of showing a noisy group the advantages of being quiet and listening.

Listening that is more stillness and reflection than true listening is described in Charlotte Zolotow's If You Listen. A little girl misses her father, who is far away, and wonders if he still loves her.

> "You have to listen inside yourself,"
> her mother said,
> just the way you strain
> to hear the dog barking in the hills,
> or the train rushing by in the night,
> or the rustle of birds
> in the leaves of the trees,
> or the church bells
> from a church you can't see,
> or a boat whistle in the fog.
> If you listen hard you'll feel
> someone far away sending love to you."

The sounds described are more poetic than prose, and certainly more in keeping with the spirit of poetry than much of the verse which is read to children. Verse is certainly an enjoyable listening experience for many young children, but it does not usually emphasize listening itself.

Listen, Rabbit by Aileen Fisher is another book which is essentially poetry. A boy talks to a rabbit and surmises all the things a rabbit who is very still and has very long

ears must be able to hear. While the boy is ostensibly doing all the talking, he is in fact listening to beautiful sounds and listening to himself. The mood created by the words is enhanced by the accompanying pictures. Depending on the maturity of a particular group, it may be more appropriate to read this book to individuals or very small groups, where a cozy atmosphere may help children to achieve the stillness required of a book which does not portray the action-packed sequences usually seen on TV!

Listening to Others.

Probably one of the most important reasons for encouraging children to listen is that we all, as human beings, have a need to be listened to. Yet this theme appears sadly lacking in picture books for young children. Children's worlds seem to be worlds of action and children's books seem to be full of characters doing things. Two books which seem to indicate the importance of people listening to each other are: Nobody Listens to Andrew, in which a young child tries to tell olders (but not betters) that there is a bear in his room, and A Friend Can Help, in which an older girl tells her friend about her parents' divorce and feels much better because her friend listened to her. The language used in these books is humdrum and prosaic by comparison with the best of children's literature. One is a beginning-to-read book (and not the best in the field, at

that) and the other sounds more like a guidance manual than a piece of literature. The colored drawings in one and color photographs in the other also do not do justice to the wealth of talent available in the illustrations of picture books.

The courageous and persevering elephant in Horton Hears a Who! does listen carefully and is able to hear some very small creatures talking to him. This Dr. Seuss character is lovable and admirable for his defense of these creatures "no matter how small-ish."

Some tender children's books imply indirectly that a mother's careful listening to her child aids her in appropriately meeting her child's needs. Thus she fosters a positive relationship between them. The young rabbit in The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown keeps describing ways he plans to get away from his mother. The mother listens carefully to these fanciful ideas and responds how she will affectionately get him back, thus reassuring him of her constant presence and love. (The young bunny in this book can be referred to as a "she" with no ill effects.) And who can forget the mother of Little Bear, ever ready to listen to his real-life and fanciful adventures? Else Minarik's series have been illustrated by Maurice Sendak and make worthwhile beginning readers.

Part of human relationships is also showing

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consideration for others by desisting from forcing them to hear noises that, in a given moment, can be unpleasant for them. Poor owl in Good-Night, Owl by Pat Hutchins is kept awake all day by the varied sounds of the other tenants of the tree where Owl lives. "The sparrows chirped, cheep cheep. The doves cooed, croo croo, and Owl couldn't sleep." The surprise ending is humorous, but a more constructive solution is found in Mama Don't Allow by Thacher Hurd. The noise of Miles' new saxophone drives everyone crazy until he teams up to form a band with three other musicians.

The handicapped require special consideration from others, which can sometimes be fostered by greater awareness of their unique predicaments and potential. S. Cosgrove's Kartusch, a little blind snake, is very aware of what he hears and teaches the Furry Eyefuls to listen. A more realistic rendition of what it is like to be handicapped is described in Jeanne Whitehouse Peterson's I Have a Sister, My Sister is Deaf. The author did, in fact, grow up with a younger sister who was deaf. One can hear the ring of authenticity:

> I have a sister who will never hear the branches
> scraping against the window of our room.
> She will not hear the sweet tones of the wind chimes
> I have hung up there.
> But when the storms come,
> my sister does not wake to the sudden rolling thunder,
> or to the quick clap-clap of the shutters in the winds.
> My little sister sleeps.
> I am the one who is afraid.

Books about the handicapped are, of course, in a serious vein. They help to point to the worth of the individual and the importance of listening. The importance of listening carefully can also be treated in a light vein, as is shown by the mal entendu stories. A character hears incorrectly, and then acts on this false information, with humorous results. A bookseller in Sue Bretner's The Bookseller's Advice helps villagers with their problems. Neither he nor they know he is growing a little deaf with advancing age. His misunderstandings cause some unintended results, but everything works out for the best in the end. Of course, people who are too haughty to listen at all can get into plenty of trouble, as described in the Scandinavian folk tale, The Squire's Bride. The squire gets his come-uppance when his "bride" turns out to be a mare, all bedecked with bridal gown and veil!

As educators of young children, we are always searching for quality books to share with our children. Sometimes we read aloud to a group; at other times we encourage young readers to pursue books independently. Why not economize by taking advantage of reading time to provide an enjoyable experience while furthering comprehension and language arts abilities, and the valuing of listening itself?

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LISTENING AND STORY STRUCTURE IN BOOKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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.scary sounds and dealing with fears
.loud sounds (enjoyable to children)

Alyesworth, Jim. Tonight's the Night. Chicago: Whitman, 1981.

A little boy learns what the night sounds are like around his house--noises he was not aware of during the day.

Aylesworth, Jim. Siren in the Night. Niles, Ill: Whitman, 1983.

A siren can be a scary noise--especially at night.

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In verse the author speculates on what sounds seem like at night.

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Photographs depcit young children listening to the everyday sounds of their school environment.

* Brown, Margaret W. Noisy Book. New York: Scott, 1939.

The first of Brown's noisy books, in which Muffin must wear a bandage over his eyes. He listens to sounds and even tries to guess a special sound.

Brown, Margaret W. Country Noisy Book. New York: Scott, 1940.

Muffin goes to the farm and hears a variety of interesting animal and country noises.

Brown, Margaret W. Indoor Noisy Book. New York: Scott, 1942.

Muffin has to stay inside and hears all the indoor sounds.

* Brown, Margaret. The Winter Noisy Book. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947.

Brown is more poetic in this book as Muffin hears the soft sounds of winter.

* Carlson, Bernice W. Listen! And Help Tell the Story. New York: Abingdon Press, 1965.

Children are encouraged to supply sound effects to this story.

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This book depicts the sights and sounds of the homey experience of a walk in the country.

Kuskin, Karla. All Sizes of Noises. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.

Just as objects can be seen to come in different sizes, so do noises, which can be heard at different volumes.

LeTord, Bijou. An Alphabet of Sounds. New York: Four Winds Press, 1981.

This alphabet has a sound for each letter of the alphabet: arf, boo, click, etc.

* Mathews, Geda B. What Was That! New York: Golden Press, 1975.

Three young bears are frightened by noises they hear in the night. Each time they are reassured that they are the small sounds of little bugs going to bed.

Myller, Rolf. A Very Noisey Day. New York: Atheneum, 1981.

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Ogle, L., & Thoburn, T. I Hear: Sounds in a Child's World. New York: American Heritage Press, 1971.

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This cardboard book is for the very young to enjoy sounds.

Ziefert, Harriet, & Gorbaty, Norman. Baby Ben's Go Go Book. New York: Random House, 1984.

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II. Valuing of Quieter Sounds: .quiet sounds
.poetic sounds
.listening to oneself

Baylor, Byrd, & Parnall, Peter. The Other Way to Listen. New York: Scribner's, 1978.

When you are close to nature and yourself, you can hear the rocks murmuring and the hills singing.

Elkin, Benjamin. The Loudest Noise in the World. New York: Viking Press, 1954.

A young prince wants the loudest noise in the world for a birthday present. He is surprised by the silence he gets, and consequently enjoys for the first time the singing of a bird.

Fisher, Aileen. Listen, Rabbit. New York: Crowell, 1964.

A young boy describes to a rabbit the many things a very still animal with good ears can hear. This book is written in a very poetic manner.

Garelick, May. Sounds of a Summer Night. Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1963.

Description of sounds between sunset and sunrise: frogs, clocks.

Hopkins, Lee Bennett. Morning, Noon, and Nightime, Too. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.

Children will enjoy this collection of poems that take the listener through a day of amazing and amusing sounds.

* Zolotow, Charlotte. If you Listen. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.

A mother reassures a little girl that she can feel her father's love from far away be being still and receptive to sounds and feelings that come to one across a long distance.

III. Listening to Others: .people need to be listened to
.consideration for others
.handicapped (blind listen, deaf cannot)
.mal entendu (comprehending incorrectly)

Berger, Terry. A Friend Can Help. Milwaukee, Wis.: Raintree Editions, 1974.

A girl tells her friend about her feelings in realtion to her parents' divorce and finds that talking to a good listener makes her feel better.

* Breitner, Sue. The Bookseller's Advice. New York: Viking Press, 1981.

A bookseller who is getting a little deaf recommends highly inappropriate books, when his customers seek advice. Somehow it all works out to their benefit.

Brown, Margaret W. The Runaway Bunny. New York: Harper, 1942.

Mother Bunny listens to her child's plans to run away and adjusts her plans for staying with him, thus reassuring him of her constant presence and love.

Cosgrove, S. Kartusch. Los Angeles: Price/Stern/Sloan, 1982.

A little blind snake teaches the Furry Eyefuls to listen.

* Geisel, Theodor (Dr. Suess). Horton Hears a Who! New York: Random House, 1954.

Horton the elephant believes that even the smallest beings have a right to be heard and protected from narm.

* Guilfoile, Elizabeth. Nobody Listens to Andrew. Chicago: Follett, 1957.

Older people do not take Andrew seriously when he tries to tell them there is a bear on his bed--and there is, too!

Heide, Perry. Sound of Sunshine, Sound of Rain. New York: Parents, 1970.

A blind boy finds a friend.

Hurd, Thacher. Mama Don't Allow. New York: Harper & Row, 1984.

The noise of Miles' new saxophone is driving everyone crazy until he teams up to form a band with three other musicians.

* Hutchins, Pat. The Surprise Party. New York: Macmillan, 1969.

Rabbit has a hard time getting people to come to his party as they have heard and understood incorrectly what his plans are.

* Hutchins, Pat. Good-Night, Owl! New York: Macmillan, 1972.

An owl is kept awake all day by the noises of the animals that share his tree with him. Wonderful illustrations.

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McGovern, Ann. Too Much Noise. New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1967.

In the folk-tale genre, an old man finally follows advice of getting rid of his animals that made home too noisey. Colorful.

Minarik, Else H. Little Bear. New York: Harper & Row, 1957.

Mother Bear listens to Little Bear's account of his pretence--a trip to the moon--and joins in, being careful to follow his flight into fantasy and return to reality according to what Little Bear tells her. In this way she fosters their relationship.

Orgel, D. The Uproar. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970.

A child thinks his mother said she was going to the "uproar" rather than the "opera."

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